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ABSTRACT

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THE MODULARIZATION OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The standard classification of women's roles into the traditional, dual career, and single parent constellations is unnecessarily restrictive and stereotyping. These categories reflect neither the myriad of role choices facing women today, nor the forces shaping the resulting contexts. This paper focuses upon modules, the component task or activity sequences, which compose the total combination of roles played by members of heterogeneous and highly differentiated societies. Socialization and subsequent opportunities decreasingly channel women into a few constellations. Rather, depending upon her context, she may choose a number of modules to which she attaches varying degrees of commitment. Modules may be added or deleted and the degrees of commitment to each may alter rapidly. In fact, the saliency of modules may be manipulated. Increasingly a woman's context, resources and interests, rather than allocation or selection of a core module, determine future module decisions, including degree of felt commitment to each.

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The standard conceptualization of woman's roles in sociology employs three ideal type role constellations: traditional, dual-career and single parent. The usefulness of these types are declining for two reasons. The fit between the role constellations as portrayed in the ideal type constructs and the actual practices occuring in post industrial societies is diminishing. The second reason lies in the theoretical focusing of attention on certain facets of the woman's activities to the detriment of others. The present theoretical framework has oriented empirical investigations into the area of childrearing, spouse interactions, decision making processes, work patterns, and related concerns (for example Holmstrom 1972, Scanzoni 1970 and Veroff and Feld 1971). This paper offers a more inclusive and differentiated model of women's roles which accounts for present patterns and the emerging trends without explicitly or implicitly channeling attention in certain directions. Sometimes it becomes necessary to introduce a new theory to create other avenues for research, rather than waiting for demonstrable obsolescence of a theory, in the light of existing research findings.

Traditional role constellations assume the existence of many associated roles adhering to one or two salient roles, the latter

providing the core of the constellation. Such role constellations are fundamentally meaningful in societies in which there is common development of roles over the life cycle. These conceptualizations are appropriately applied to folk societies (Redfield 1947), and societies with mechanical solidarity (Durkheim 1933). As one moves toward the other pole of these continua, namely urban societies with organic solidarity, these conceptualizations become increasingly less accurate. The reason for this decreasing fit is the proliferation of roles in the society. Concomitant with proliferation of roles is a greater opportunity to select among roles, resulting in an increasingly complex matrix of roles in highly differentiated societies. In the latter, the consequence for the individual actor becomes an increased number of role choices during the life span, which means a reduction in the permanence of roles. In traditional role constellations the network of associations, whether primary or secondary, formal or informal, were overlapping. The impact of this overlap was a continuous normative reinforcement of core roles (Mitchell 1969:27).

In societies with reduced permanence of roles, actors become involved in roles with different normative expectations. These different roles emanating from the proliferation of reference groups, each with normative guidelines, are to be internalized and

acted upon by the actor at different points in time. This circumstance may result in role conflict but it does not necessarily lead to anomie. Anomie, or normlessness, (Merton 1957:157), occurs only when the norms are not sufficiently strong to guide the behavior of the actor. With reduced permanence of roles, actors learn to shift their normative position to reflect the norms of the appropriate reference group. It should be borne in mind that these norms are contextually binding on the actor.

By role constellation is meant the culturally defined cluster of roles incumbent upon an actor to perform as a result of his or her position in society. Prerequisite to the breakdown of role constellations is a highly differentiated and urbanized society (Goode 1963). The latter are characterized by high levels of social and geographical mobility, extensive formal education, increased utilization of service industries and convenience products, growth of leisure time activities, and age segregation. Due to these changes, there is more concern with self-actualization which has directed efforts toward consciousness raising, internalized relativism, and a more egalitarian quality to interpersonal relations. With the latter, modularization (Toffler 1970:95) of role constellations becomes possible. A module is a component alternative task or activity sequence of a role.

The process of modularization has the following characteristics. Role constellations break down into their autonomous component roles and task or activity sequences. There are multiple educational and activity trajectories. The frequency of engagement and disengagement from various relationships is increased. Consciousness is marked by change and an inability to sustain sameness, routinization, and inactivity (Wirth 1938). Automatic priorities are obviated and increasingly individualistic solutions are sought in all spheres of activity. There is a compartmentalization of activities, often with different persons and norms operative in each context.

The process of modularization is only beginning to crystalize, though some characteristics have been apparent for a number of decades. Modularization is part of the larger process of differentiation in industrial and post industrial societies. For women this has meant increased opportunities for participation in the society outside of the home, most notably in employment and education. With greater differentation has also come secularization and a more scientifically influenced world view, stressing proximate causality, innovation, and normative change. At the same time, the family has been largely eliminated as a unit of production, thereby reducing the necessity for large time commitments within the home. There has been and continues to be a large number of

push and pull factors moving women away from the home and altering the cognitions and social meanings for those who remain in the home (Holter 1970:170-71).

Tendencies toward modularization have become more extensive in the mid-twentieth century. Women have reduced the child bearing and rearing segment of their lives, increased dramatically their rates of employment even when they have small children, become far more extensively and intensively involved in formal education, decreased their willingness to perpetuate unsatisfactory marriages, and increased their expectations of what constitutes a satisfying life. These tendencies have moved increasing numbers of contemporary women away from the traditional ideal type role constellation. Even for those who continue to operate in the latter constellation, the process of modularization is occurring. The wife-mother role of traditional women was paramount. Household duties and rigid normative pre- and proscriptions channelled their activities in a small domain. Contemporary traditional women are experiencing an enlargement of their realm of normatively acceptable activities(Rapoport and Rapoport 1971:21). To the extent that this enlargement is not overshadowed by rising expectations, the woman can remain satisfied with her role constellation.

A number of traditional women, however, have become severely dissatisfied with their predetermined role constraints, which limit

their opportunities for setting their own priorities (Friedan 1963). Many of these women received fulfillment at an earlier time as traditional women but currently feel cheated of value, work fulfillment, and meaning. One of the major problems of such women lie in their socialization to a model which is becoming increasingly less supported by the society as a whole. Some of these women slowly begin to redefine their lives in ways more conducive to their own development and satisfaction. Many of them return to school, buy prepared foods, and spend evenings away from the family. Such activities effect a gradual release from the former demands of the family structure. This process may take a number of years and/or go hand in hand with lowered demands from an older marriage and older children. The number of discretionary choices in various areas of life becomes enlarged and there is an increase in the social legitimacy for such activities. The combination of an enlarged domain and more legitimate alternatives, coupled with rising expectations, suggests that the role constellation of traditional woman will, in the future, only occur periodically in a woman's life.

Increasingly women either begin adulthood or, after a period of being a traditional woman, move into another ideal type role constellation, dual career woman. Dual career women are seen as having

two salient roles: family and work. Women fitting this type of model have been researched in terms of their performance relative to traditional women and relative to their husbands. Dual career women have been found to have more decision making power in marriage than non-working women, to have less decision making power than their husbands (Scanzoni 1972:70), and their marital satisfaction tends to be similar to that of non-working wives (Blood & Wolfe 1960:101). Holmstrom (1972) has examined the specific case of professional dual career women. Her study illuminates the strains in the dual career model. One strain is the tendency to dichotomize the two core roles of work and family. Investigators are less likely to examine the impact of family on work and, therefore, fail to make conclusions about the impact of such overlap as it affects the total domain of the woman. For example, periodic interaction between family and work personnel and the attendant evaluations of her resulting from their views of her performance in other roles. Investigations frequently focus on role conflict at the expense of an examination of how the roles are supportive of each other. The woman's income often permits her family a lifestyle and activities in which they could not otherwise engage. Occupational and family demands are often seen as equal, independent of the type of work in which she engages. The latter obscures the various mixes of family and work for dual career women. Rapoport and Rapoport (1971) confront these issues and examine them in considerable detail. However, their use

of the dual-career model limits them from fully elucidating the on-going processes involved.

The distinction between leisure and work activities needs greater exploration than it has received to date, since, at the present time, the customary distinctions are of declining applicability. For example, a woman taking her children to the theater can view this activity either as leisure or work. The woman going to a conference can regard her presence there either as work or leisure. It should be noted that the dual career woman is a category within the broader unit of working wives.

The extent of modularization among working and dual career women is greater than for traditional women. The reason lies in the presence of two, rather than only one sphere upon which the process can operate. The two spheres can be viewed as discreet role constellations and the generally limited overlap occurring between the two limits direct control of actions in one by the other. Modularization is encouraged in dual career and working women if there are not normative guidelines sufficiently strong to inhibit such a direction of change. There is a built in opportunity for modularization in the work situation since it demands multiple relationships and encourages the ability to

create, renew, and break these relationships. In order to advance in an occupational setting, skill levels have to increase and/or new skills have to be obtained. Advancement alters the opportunity structure and the dual career woman must respond with altered performances (see, for example, Rapoport and Rapoport 1971:253-254).

Social justifications encouraging modularization are those connected with the acceptance of "socially legitimate" role conflict. In other words, working women can legitimately claim the necessity of staying home with a sick child while they can also legitimately require support from spouses and/or children for work activities demanded of them during non-regular working hours. The process of modularization is a learning process which can be viewed from the perspective of norm violations. Such violations are products of the actor's world view. Initially, they are commonly minor, though escalated over a longer or shorter period of time depending upon the degree to which the actor can justify her actions and the repercussions are not sufficiently severe to sabotage cherished relationships or ideas. Conversely, the adjustment also results in changed expectations for performance on the part of those placing demands on the actor. A tendency toward modularization increases the actor's psychological and actual arena of movement. This increase in movement, if successful, increasingly encourages more individualistic

solutions as the perspective of norm violation is slowly replaced by a new normative structure. Dual career women have the possibility for easier adjustment if they fail in one or the other of their role constellations, not only by the trade-off between the two but the actor may draw support from achievement in work or visa-versa. In other words, failure in marriage does not constitute total failure of the person. Also, as noted above, the degree to which modularization has occurred will provide new combination possibilities applicable toward the prevention of total failure in either area.

The growing tendency toward modularization among contemporary women points to the emergence of a new ideal type, modular woman. Prerequisite to the appearance of modular woman is a society in which the normative structures are open to relativistic interpretations. This relativism received great impetus from the spread of Einstein's theory in American culture, manifested in the social sciences by greater emphasis on systems theoretical models. The relativism present in contemporary American culture, coupled with the high standard of living, has led to an opportunity structure in which some women can become what Maslow (1970) has called self-actualized. Only women highly oriented toward self-actualization can closely approximate the ideal type of modular woman. Since the development of self-actualization occurs in childhood and adolescence, modular women do not emerge until adulthood. In contemporary

American childhood and adolescence, the foci of socialization are twofold: one is directed toward the recognition and identification of existing normative structures and the other is oriented toward self-actualization with increasing encouragement for the individual to set her own goals. Consequently, a large number of adult women will follow, to a considerable extent, the already institutionalized role constellations. These women are not modular. On the other hand, women with the prerequisite characteristics (i.e. physical, social, and psychological qualities) and autonomy of action may emerge in adulthood as modular.

Changes connected with women's roles virtually eliminate the socio-cultural stance that some roles are closed to women. Manifestations of cultural lag are, however, occurring. Socialization patterns orienting girls toward traditional role constellations are still practiced. Social forces operating in the larger society, manifested in the changing legal status of women, are working against these older socialization patterns, opening more possibilities for women to become modular. A characteristic of the modular woman's world view is the recognition that virually no roles are closed to her. Her goals, resources, and opportunities become more open and applicable to a greatly increased number of roles from which to build her own individual combination of roles. Concommitant with this individual choice is the

rejection of role constellation selection by custom.

For the modular woman individual roles are autonomous, opting for one role or module explicitly not entailing the selection of associated roles or modules. Becoming a wife, for example, does not mean opting to be a mother as well. Within roles selected by the woman reciprocity, of course, remains, but it is now based to a larger extent upon negotiation. Traditionally both the specific content and actions to be performed in a role were culturally established. Modular women, however, actively participate in the specification and modification of their individual roles. The result of this negotiation may bear limited resemblance to traditional roles and their respective contents and actions. Modular woman is less predictable over her life cycle since she not only modifies her roles but she also adds and subtracts roles.

Modular women participate in a number of roles, some of which have reference groups with different norms. Modular womanhood entails on-going engagement and disengagement from roles both during one period of her life and over longer segments. On the surface this might appear to lead to a condition of anomie. Anomie, identified as depersonalization (Fromm 1955:120), is not consistant with the personality characteristics associated with modular woman. The ability to exchange

roles does not mean that the relationships entailed in the performance of those roles are vacuous. The rapid exchange of relationships requires the skill and ability to telescope relationships in time and to have both aliveness and emotional commitment to the norms of the relationship for its duration. Modular women have enduring relationships or roles which constitute a psychological base from which to draw a coherent identity.

During the process of becoming a modular woman, personal crises do appear. These crises can have two sets of outcomes: they will be resolved either against or in favor of traditional standards. Modular women are not in opposition to all cultural standards but are marked by their more individualistic resolutions to life situations. Failure as a modular woman will be traumatic, though probably less severe than for traditional or dual career women. The reduced gravity of these failures for modular women is due to the gradual adoption or elimination of modules from her life style with a low level of risk. Modular women typically engage in risk taking behavior precisely because they have personal integration which is the product of successfully resolved crises. The above does not preclude continuous status anxiety but this is a common condition of humanity. Being a modular woman during one part of the life cycle does not preclude a return to a more traditional orientation during another segment of her life.

Functionally, the proliferation of modules requires the ability to negotiate in a system which might be termed a "trade-off" system. The tradeoffs for modular women will be more extensive and complex but otherwise similar to the socially legitimate role conflict of dual career women. The trade-off system is based on the recognition that energies and time are not unbounded. Women with large numbers of modules must learn to selectively make some modules inoperative or give other modules minimal support at specific times while temporarily concentrating on other modules. For example, a woman with a family living away from home for a week while she prepares for the state bar examination. These women must also recognize that selective neglect may eliminate modules if they inaccurately predict their viability.

The process through which a woman becomes modular is of a gradual nature. As mentioned in connection with the dual career woman, it entails a learning process. The ability to acquire and reject modules will speed up as this set of skills is assimilated. This learning process gradually orients the woman toward new endeavors and, through the repetition of activities, there is an increase in the speed and performance of activities. The prerequisite time for performance of the various activities she has selected becomes a prime consideration. The trade-off system, if properly used, functions as a safeguard for continuously

high levels of activity. As the momentum of activity is increased, there is an increased probability of some overlap among modules. For instance, multiple memberships in organizations provide increased visibility and recognition by members of those associations. The general evaluation of the competence of a modular woman, if it is of a positive nature,will tend to expand her opportunity structure. These women are likely to claim modules with the highest social power and reject those to which society accords less prestige and power. However, in the societal evaluation of the woman's competence, stereotyping may occur. Rising expectations based on overgeneralization of competence by associates is likely to bring criticism. Such criticism, if not countered by increased performance levels, is likely to contract her opportunity structure.

Another difficulty for modular women is the unequal distribution of demands over time. Modules often become simultaneously salient. In this circumstance strain occurs, sometimes leading to the elimination of modules. Whether she loses modules due to the simultaneous saliency of several modules, or to a failure of the trade-off system, and/or to promotion above her resource level, this permits her to give greater attention to her performance in the remaining modules.

There are, of course, modular women who are considered to have

low performance levels. These women might also have high levels of activity while their modules are selected from those areas which society deems unimportant. Such women will, therefore, not become socially significant, though they may have high levels of self-actualization.

As previously mentioned, modular women can only occur in a highly differentiated society. To date, these societies have had a tremendous amount of media exposure, rapidly changing values, high levels of activity, and promoted personalities which have an inability to sustain sameness, repetition, and inactivity. The conception of time for modular women is simultaneously present and future oriented since she is highly concerned with both proximate and long term goals.

Life cycle refers to successive patterned stages in life associated with developmental tasks. In a society in which modularization has become a major life style, such stages become multiphasic and less adequate as predictors of behavior from adolescence to the end of life than in more traditional societies. Modularization is so far not a recognizable pattern prior to adolescence since the evaluation of self-actualization is difficult and the formal educational requirements still provide a standardized sequence of activities. Toward the end of adolescence and upon entrance into adulthood, the combination possibilities are

substantially increased, making modularization clearly apparent. There are already some discernable modular patterns in contemporary American society. The first pattern, that of an enlarged domain of normatively acceptable activities, has been discussed under contemporary traditional women. The second pattern, the process or modularization, has been presented in the updated view of dual career women. The third and more encompassing category contains women who operate in a modularized life style. One set of life cycle patterns for modular women are similar to those of contemporary men, in which the woman embarks on a career after leaving school and her working life is unbroken until retirement. She may or may not marry and/or have a family, but if she does, the husband and/or children do not cause major breaks in her activities outside the home. The other set of life cycle patterns segregate family and work sequentially, as when a woman enters or returns to the work force when her youngest child no longer needs extensive attention. In the latter cases, women commonly complete their educations after having had children. Contrary to past expectations, her children are often very young while she is in school. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for these women to complete their formal educations while they are in their forties. Since they are now educated and there are many employers recruiting women, these women can commonly obtain employment relatively late in life. Some variants of the above (see, for example Holmstrom 1972:55-56 and Rapoport and Rapoport 1971:20-21), or,

perhaps, other life cycle patterns will crystalize as modular woman becomes more prevalent in contemporary society. Education is no longer found just at the beginning of a career. It is an on-going process by which people acquire new skills at any time in their life. Education is frequently the source of new skills, which in turn is often the route to new module acquisition. In some cases, an established career or other activity is terminated and a new one established. In terms of work, Toffler (1970:210) has suggested that the trend of the future lies in "serial careers" rather than in careers. In other words, a person may change from one type of work to another at intervals in his or her life. This is a highly modular life style characteristic.

Retirement does not necessarily mean the end of being modular. Retirement may bring the enhancement of some previous modules and the development of new modules, as well as the mandated reduction of activity in or termination of one or more work modules. Retirement will not, therefore, mean disengagement but, commonly, a continuance of a number of modules.

In summary it is claimed that the modularization process is occurring in American society. The focus on women arises from two circumstances. First, due to historical developments, the process is

more dramatically seen among women than men. Second, modularization is occurring more rapidly among women since they have more options open to them. There is greater movement toward role constellation breakdown among women than men. Women can remain in the home, be involved to varying degrees in activities outside the home, or some combination of both. Participation outside the home may be for remuneration or not and full or part time. The mandatory role for men is full time gainful employment. Some men, most notably young professionals, are becoming modular also. In part the modularization of men is due to the same forces as are operating on women. Additionally, the increased demands upon men by their families and the altered social climate which favors more active participation of men in household activities and child rearing are catapulting men into modularity. That women, who have held, on the whole, less satisfying roles in the society, should move toward modularity more rapidly than men is to be expected by the law of evolutionary potential (Sahlins and Service 1960: 97-98). The modularization of women is growing out of neither an anti-male nor an emulation of the traditional male stance. Rather it is developing from an increased opportunity structure and a heightened desire for self actualization among women.

The process of modularization and the presence of modular women in post industrial societies is an emergent phenomenon. Tendencies toward

modularization have been present in American society recently. These include a breakdown of role constellations into their component roles and task or activity sequences, greater rates of engagement and disengagement from social relationships, increasingly individualistic solutions to circumstances found in all aspects of life, and a compartmentalization of activities with different persons and norms operating in various contexts.

Some authors have explored topics related to those examined here. In the context of marriage O'Neill and O'Neill (1971) have spoken of role flexibility, self-actualization, equality, and strong identity in a setting which accepts pluralism. Rapoport and Rapoport (1971) have been concerned with dual-career families using a more descriptive framework. This paper proposes a new model which orients investigation into all areas of an actor's life. By looking at an actor's roles the person can be viewed as a dynamic totality. Examining all of the component roles and modules of an actor provides a means of analyzing persons in highly differentiated societies without artificially reducing the individuality, complexity, and interconnectedness of their behavior. The focus becomes the actor's resource and opportunity structures, module additions and subtractions, role and module behavior negotiations, and trade-offs among modules in pursuit of the person's interests.

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